

Frequently Asked Questions Certified Court Interpreters

In what languages may one become a certified court interpreter?

Washington offers certification in the following languages: *Arabic, Cantonese, Korean, Laotian, Mandarin, Russian, Somali, Spanish, and Vietnamese.*

Anyone who wants to interpret in these languages in a legal proceeding must pass the state certification exam, which consists of a written component and an oral component. Candidates are tested on their knowledge of vocabulary, ethics, and court terminology on the written portion of the exam. Those who pass the written component are eligible to take the oral component, which tests their skills in simultaneous and consecutive interpretation and sight translation.

What are the criteria to become a certified court interpreter?

Certified court interpreters must meet the following requirements for certification:

- 1) pass both the *written exam* and *oral exam*;
- 2) attend a mandatory *Introduction to Interpreting* class;
- 3) submit to a *criminal background check*; and
- 4) execute the *Oath of Interpreter*.

What is the cost to become a certified court interpreter?

The cost to take the Written Exam is \$50. The cost for the Oral Exam is \$125 for Washington State residents and \$500 for out-of-state residents. The cost for processing a criminal background check is \$30.

What is a court interpreter?

A court interpreter is anyone who interprets in a civil or criminal court proceeding (e.g., arraignment, motion, hearing, deposition, trial) for a witness or defendant who speaks or understands little or no English. Court interpreters must accurately interpret for individuals with a high level of education and an extensive vocabulary, as well as persons with very limited language skills without changing the language register of the speaker. Interpreters are also sometimes responsible for translating written documents, often of a legal nature, from English into the target language and from the target language into English.

How great is the need for court interpreters?

Filling the needs of non-English-speaking persons who use the courts is crucial because any failure on their part to understand the system or the law could result in severe injustice.

Is special training required to become a court interpreter?

Yes, court interpreting is a very demanding profession that requires complete fluency in both English and the foreign language. The level of expertise required for this profession is far greater than that required for everyday bilingual conversation. The interpreter must be able to deal with the specialized language of judges and attorneys, as well as with the street slang of witnesses and the technical jargon of criminologists, police officers, and expert witnesses. Most people do not have full command of all registers of both English and the foreign language and, therefore, require special training to acquire it. Although there are no minimum requirements that must be met in order to apply to take the state certification test, applicants are encouraged to complete formal, college-level course work and training in both languages and modes of interpreting before applying for the examination. Bellevue Community College offers some courses in Spanish/English. We encourage you to contact local colleges and request information about their programs. If no college-level courses are available, the following self-study techniques are suggested: (1) expand your vocabulary, (2) develop your own glossaries, and (3) develop interpreting techniques. In order to pass the certification examinations you must enhance your skills in (1) consecutive interpretation, (2) simultaneous interpretation, and (3) sight translation.

What kinds of skills does it take to be a good court interpreter?

In addition to total fluency in both English and the foreign language, a court interpreter should have excellent public speaking and interpersonal skills. Sometimes the testimony to be interpreted is shocking and traumatic and the interpreter must be able to deal with such matters without becoming emotionally involved. The interpreter must also be able to refrain from expressing personal opinions or acting as an advocate for one side or the other in a court case, and must be able to work unobtrusively. The interpreter must be willing to work well under pressure and react quickly to solve complex linguistic and ethical problems as they arise. On the other hand, when a problem cannot be solved by the interpreter alone, the interpreter must demonstrate the good judgment required to inform the court of that fact and take whatever steps are necessary to resolve the situation. Finally, good court interpreters constantly strive to improve their skills by reading from a wide variety of sources, attending conferences, researching new terms and concepts, and honing their interpreting techniques.

What is the job market like for court interpreters?

There is a great demand for certified court interpreters in areas with large immigrant populations. Most court interpreters work as freelance or per diem interpreters, meaning that they are hired by the day or the half-day, rather than being permanent employees of the trial courts. A freelance interpreter must be willing to travel from one trial court to another, perhaps even from one county trial court system to another depending on the language, in order to make a living as an interpreter. Court interpreters are generally paid by the hour.

What is the Administrative Office of the Courts' (AOC) role in the Court Interpreter Program?

Ensuring equal access to the courts has been and continues to be a priority of the AOC. The AOC was mandated by the Legislature as of July 1, 1990, to administer a comprehensive testing and certification program for language interpreters (RCW 2.43.070). Specifically, the statute requires the AOC to:

- 1) Work with private and public educational institutions to establish a certification preparation curriculum
- 2) Adopt standards of proficiency, written and oral, in English and the language to be interpreted
- 3) Conduct periodic examinations
- 4) Compile and maintain a current list of certified interpreters

Is there a commission that oversees the Court Interpreter Program?

The Supreme Court established the Court Interpreter Commission through General Rule 11.1. The Commission is responsible for maintaining a policy manual for the interpreter program and staffing committees on Issues, Discipline, and Judicial and Court Manager Education.

How will courts recognize my status as a certified court interpreter?

As a certified court interpreter, you will receive an ID badge to wear during your work as an interpreter. We encourage you to wear your badge at all court-related jobs and we request that judges, court clerks, and court administrators ask to see your badge when you appear for jobs. The certified ID badge has a horizontal orientation, where as the registered ID badge has a vertical orientation.

Once I become a certified court interpreter, are there ongoing requirements to remain certified?

To maintain a certified status, an interpreter must submit a compliance form every two years that documents participation in 16 hours of continuing education, two of which must be ethics. All continuing education classes must be approved by the Administrative Office of the Courts. Interpreters are required to keep documentation of proof of compliance for five years.

How are providers of continuing education activities for court interpreters selected?

Interested continuing education providers must adhere to the guidelines developed by the Court Interpreter Commission. The providers must comply with guidelines for application procedures and provider responsibilities.

Where can I obtain more information about becoming a court interpreter?

Professional associations may offer workshops and conferences at which novices are welcome. Introductory courses in court interpreting at colleges and universities are also good sources of information. We encourage you to contact them. Attending court sessions at your local courthouse will give you a good idea of the kinds of proceedings in which you will be expected to interpret, and you may be able to observe a court interpreter at work.

Will my status as a certified court interpreter be recognized by courts in other states?

Reciprocity is a decision that rests with the court in the other state. If a court contacts you for interpreting work, you are welcome to share your credential as a Washington State certified interpreter, which may or may not make a difference to courts outside Washington State.

How do I sign up to be notified of the next written exam?

You may complete and submit a Written Exam Notification form available on AOC's website to:

Administrative Office of the Courts
Court Interpreter Program
PO Box 41170
Olympia, WA 98504-1170

By submitting this form, you will receive a registration packet for the next written exam. If your address changes and you still want to receive notice, please contact Tina Williamson at tina.williamson@courts.wa.gov to update your information.

Who do I contact to find out more about the Certified Court Interpreter Program?

If you have additional questions after reviewing the Certified interpreter information, please contact Tina Williamson at (360) 705-5279 or tina.williamson@courts.wa.gov.